

NATIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE CONFERENCE - PHILADELPHIA

Session Name and Time: Handling Environmental Complaints
November 30, 1999

Featured Speakers: Lynne Moss, Coordinator, Pollution Response Programs, Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality, and Judith Duncan, Customer Service Division Director, Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

Presentation Summary: Speakers discussed innovative and extensive program for handling environmental complaints in Oklahoma.

Important Ideas from the Discussion:

1. Set goals
 - A. Timeliness
 - B. Measurement
 - C. Reporting
2. Get feedback
3. Continue to I.D. Problem Areas
4. Think Outside the box

Key Questions of the Speaker:

Q. What if after investigating a complaint, no violation is found.

A. A letter is sent explaining what steps were taken to address the complaint and the results. Talk to resident who made complaint.

Q. How did you get the resources to undertake this program.

A. Reorientation of existing staff. Creation of a new agency utilizing half of what had been the Health Department. We had a directive from the legislature to establish mechanisms of

persistent.

How can EPA use this information? We can use the Oklahoma example in marketing our hotlines and systematically monitoring feedback and follow up well as raising the customer hotlines as a priority.

Where in EPA can this information be used? Probably best at the regional level but can be used for all 800 numbers and hotlines.

Any commitments to follow-up action at EPA: None.

Environmental Complaints Program -Lynne Moss

Program grew out of the 1993 Environmental Quality Act passed by the Oklahoma legislature. Established Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

Complaints program established with the goals: (1).provide rapid response (2) Bring about regulatory compliance through a consistent and structured process.

Polling of people in agencies showed complaints took a low priority and were regarded as a nuisance.

To change this, DEQ held pep rallies. The mantra was “Warm and Fuzzy”

The environmental complaint programs had 12 elements

1. Environmental Complaints Hotline - Answered 24 hours a day 7 days a week. 6 full time paid staff work Monday through Friday during business hours. During evenings and weekends volunteers from the department are paid a small stipend to carry a cell phone at all times. 34 regional offices have 78 multi-media environmental investigators on staff.

Collect lots of data. Charts and graphs on issues and sources. Technical staff trained in report writing. Volume of complaints resulted in septic system legislation and trash cops to enforce roadside dumping laws.

6. Verify violation send warning letter to violator immediately and supply customer with a copy.

7. Long term resolution customer kept informed

8. Identification of problem areas through analysis of complaint patterns.

- Chronic complaints - 3 complaints in 3 or more months in 6 month period.
- High profile complaints -3 complaints for 3 months in 5 month period.
- Target complaint - 3 complaints in a month.

These complaints receive special attention. In 1995, 13 complaints were chronic, only three in 1999

9. Resolve all complaints within 90 days. All complaints passed 90 days are brought up to the Executive Director at the division directors meeting. No complaint has passed 90 day goal since 1995.

10. Complaints outside DEQ jurisdiction are referred to the appropriate agency on the customer's behalf. Customer is given a contact name and phone number at the appropriate agency in a follow up letter.

11. Access is provided to alternative dispute resolution (confidentially).

12. Customer satisfaction survey sent to each complainant and responsible party at end of process. 15% to 17% respond. Less than 15% are negative. Complaints sent to supervisors.

Reasons for success:

- Continuously worked on the process, looking for ways to improve.
- Change of mind set within Department.